

would be a mistake. Branagh has showcased some fine performances, but whether or not a full text film necessarily conveys the truest dynamic of *Hamlet* has not been proven.

This study has attempted to show that when a director undertakes the task of popularizing *Hamlet*, he ultimately goes on a quest of illumination, either consciously or subconsciously, attempting to shed light not only on Shakespeare's text, but on himself and his culture. The beauty of *Hamlet* comes from its timeless ability to transcend the boundaries of a mere product positioned in a particular time period and medium. Thus, where an adaptation is ultimately finite, the play itself is boundless, and so the possibilities for interpretations are never ending. Laurence Olivier, Tony Richardson, Franco Zeffirelli, and Kenneth Branagh have personalized *Hamlet* and produced, for themselves and their culture, the "abstract and brief chronicles of the time." As each new film maker approaches the play they will bring their "personal conception" to it, imprinting it in such a manner as to make it a contribution to the evolving cannon of Shakespearean films, as well as a mirror of themselves and the moment.



And This the Latest!

Brian Murphy

Michael Almereyda's 113-minute version, starring Ethan Hawke, and set in the New York City of 2000, is of course going to be a "take" on the four-hour complete *Hamlet*. One gets a sense of the direction by knowing the first and (except for a thematic coda) last lines: it opens with Hamlet's sad statement (lifted from the middle of the play, when he is speaking to his old school fellows Rosencrantz and Guilden-

stern), “I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth” and concludes with a newscaster: “The sight is dismal.”

Thus, we know at once that this is not going to be a *Hamlet* bursting with energy and brilliance—like, say, the legendary Richard Burton performance (for years available only as an audio-recording but now happily on DVD). No, this is a *Hamlet* for an altogether different generation. When Ethan Hawke renders the most famous line in literature, “To be or not to be,” he is holding a gun to his head, and you can’t help but feel, well, text aside, he just might do it! From the beginning, Almereyda gives Ethan Hawke a distinct look—often in a knit cap with long flaps, closed-off, withdrawn, desperately unhappy, chilly, alienated—which Hawke reflects in his delivery: his response to Horatio’s first telling him about the appearance of the Ghost—“The Ghost? My father?”—shows how perfectly Hawke can bend the rhythms of the verse to a post-Gen-X Grungey dead flatness.

And there is New York City—in which Denmark is a corporation and Elsinore a hotel—everything silver, mirror-like, reflecting hard, very hard and very cold, surfaces. And there is the music: just as Claudius (the smiling, damned villain played with glassy brilliance by Kyle MacLachlan) is about to enter the Elsinore for his press conference to rip up a newspaper photo of rival Fortinbras—“So much for him!”—and acknowledge his marriage to “our sometime sister, now our queen”—we hear timpani throbbing with the relentless tragedy of the first movement of Brahms’s Symphony I. The music recurs, still more fatefully, near the end, as Hamlet goes to the fencing match and his date with doom.

There are subtle touches throughout. Bill Murray, for example, begins the famous scene of Polonius’s parting advice to his son Laertes as he descends an open stairway. He seems frequently to inhabit lofty but inherently precarious positions. He finishes (“this above all, to thine own self be true”) and Laertes hugs him warmly: we see a little flicker cross Bill Murray’s face: well, it seems to say, I guess *that* worked.

The Ghost is treated in an arrestingly different way from

the norm (a very long way from the ghostly voice-over of John Gielgud in the Burton *Hamlet*, which Gielgud directed). Despite the cameras, the recorders, the computers, the screens everywhere, this Ghost simply walks through the door of Hamlet's high-rise apartment. Here is not much of a "countenance more in sorrow than in anger": this is one furiously pissed-off father-ghost. He grabs Hamlet by the hair ("thy knotted and combined locks to part"), and we sympathize with the Prince ("Angels and ministers of grace, defend us!") for cowering beneath him. Then the camera encircles them as the Ghost browbeats his son.

Theatrical legend has it that Shakespeare himself played the Ghost to Richard Burbage's Prince at the premiere. Therefore, it is appropriate that playwright Sam Shepard should make a rare appearance as an actor in this brief but powerful role. The ultra-modern look of this version makes the Ghost, especially in his paternal anger, seem pointedly medieval: he sounds like St. Thomas Aquinas when he explicates the doctrine of Purgatory. (Interestingly, later in the film, his brother Claudius sounds equally "medieval" in being so "doctrinally correct" regarding the sacrament of Confession.) The Ghost scene ends with a tight hug for "Remember me." Hamlet's reaction skips right over the vows about emptying "the book and volume of my brain" of anything but revenge and, instead, gets right to the modern man's agony: "The time is out of joint." He tells Horatio that "There are more things in Heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies," ["our" being a sensible substitute for "your"] but there is nothing hopeful or consoling about any of this: Hamlet's "more things" seem to be rather like Emerson's famous "things"—the ones that "are in the saddle and ride mankind." Hamlet concludes with a line lifted from much earlier in the scene, but which, however, works well at this point: "My Fate cries out!"

This *Hamlet* spends a great deal of his time alone watching images on TV, on computer and camera screens. He is thinking about "to be or not to be" when he comes across an image of the Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh and

hears him saying, “You need other beings . . . it is impossible to be by yourself . . . to be means to inter-be.” These words inspire Hamlet to write his letter to Ophelia. In the play we only hear about the letter from Polonius’s critical judgement (“a very ill phrase”) and reading of it; here, we see Hamlet writing it: “Doubt truth to be a liar, but never doubt I love.” We see him write these “ill numbers” and follow him as he walks to Ophelia’s loft and into her dark room (she is a photographer). Polonius enters; Hamlet leaves, brushing past him; Ophelia drops the note; and Polonius picks it up.

The consequence of this is considerably delayed. First, we see Hamlet watching himself, in a video loop, put a gun to his own head through some of the “To be or not to be” soliloquy. This is followed (after we see Hamlet making a note about the “vicious mole in nature” on his palm pilot) by the “you are a fishmonger” scene with Polonius, who makes his “still harping on my daughter!” comment to one of the ubiquitous surveillance cameras. Next is a quick scene in which Hamlet bursts into Claudius’s office with his gun drawn, prepared to shoot . . . only to find it empty.

So it is not surprising that Claudius thinks that Hamlet has become exceedingly dangerous. In the great scene in which Polonius reads the love letter to Their Majesties—played near a swimming pool where Claudius has been exercising and in which poor Ophelia, dragged into this scene by her father, considers drowning herself (because her father makes her life wretched rather than because he is dead)—the *film* makes it clear what a hopeless liar Polonius is: we know perfectly well that his daughter was *not* “obedient,” and Bill Murray’s performance has a sort of post-moral weariness to it. He is still a corporate cheer-leader to Claudius, but he no longer has any idea what he is cheering for or about.

Julia Stiles’ Ophelia is a study in agonized frustration. Ophelia is one of the rare Shakespeare heroines who *obeys* her father: think of Juliet; think of the opening of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where Hermia risks death in disobeying her father for her love. Laertes’s story, after the death of Polo-

nus, is obviously like Hamlet's—as it involves a question of revenge. Hamlet himself makes this point (apparently oblivious, however, to the fact that *he* would be the revenger's victim). But Ophelia's story is, more subtly and more constantly, like Hamlet's: should the father be obeyed? Stiles shows us an adult, independent Ophelia who is subtly maneuvered into a fatal obedience by Bill Murray's craftily manipulative emptiness.

And now, after two preparations, we get the “To be or not to be” scene: Hamlet is in a video store, where a great banner, GO HOME HAPPY, is nicely and ironically in view. He gives the speech as he walks along aisles marked repeatedly with the word ACTION on rows of videotapes, and which is out of range as he says, “. . . and lose the name of action.”

Hamlet goes to a dance club—bathed in an eerie, harsh green light—to meet Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. (In the text, this encounter occurs before “To be or not to be.”) A somewhat dozey or druggy “gentle Guildenstern” rests his head on Hamlet's shoulder, as Rosencrantz shouts his questions to Hamlet over the loud music. Later, the hapless duo make their report to Claudius over a speaker phone as we watch Claudius and Gertrude disport themselves most vividly and energetically “in the rank sweat of an enseamed bed.”

By contrast, very much alone, in his apartment, Hamlet gets the idea for “The Mousetrap” as he watches images of James Dean, John Gielgud, and others who appear to the lines about “this actor here.” Ophelia comes to the apartment, and he renders nearly the whole of the “Get thee to a nunnery” scene in an *extremely* reasonable tone; there are tender kisses as he says, “We are errant knaves all.” Then, as he embraces her, he finds the wire she has been wearing and he screams his response to “Where's your father?” into the microphone. In an agony of conflicted loyalties, she rips the wire off, bikes to her loft where she burns Hamlet's picture—as we notice that she, somehow, has acquired a black eye.

Hamlet is now certainly motivated for “The Mousetrap”: the assemblage gathers in a small viewing studio to see Ham-

let's film, which has a 1950's TV-show and graphics-art conception. It works. Claudius storms out and gets in a car, where he tries to confess his sin, the one with "the primal eldest curse upon it, a brother's murder." Hamlet is in the driver's seat and holds a gun on Claudius but leaps out of the car and goes to his mother's apartment. There, Polonius is hidden in a modern closet, behind a mirrored door, through which Hamlet shoots, and Polonius, "taken for his better," stumbles out, shot through the eye. Yet we note the tone of "healthful music," which Hamlet's temperate pulse makes, through the rest of this scene, which in fact is concluded—"Good night, Mother"—over the telephone.

Hamlet goes to a Laundromat and washes bloody clothes when he is accosted by Rosencrantz and Guoldenstern, followed by a no longer smiling Claudius: he punches Hamlet, a very low blow, to which Hamlet responds by kissing him, "Mother," on the lips.

The actual Mother is very glamorous and very drunk as she and the other royals see Hamlet off on a plane to England. "How all occasions do inform against me" is prompted by a TV news program about Fortinbras in First Class. One of the great "arias" in the play is delivered as he walks the aisles of Second Class. This is the moment when Hamlet most clearly steps outside himself. (The speech, along with any reference to Fortinbras, is totally cut in the Olivier version.) The trimmed speech works perfectly well: The opening 15 lines are all there, and Hamlet's mind is spread out before us: "What is a man?" Reason must not "fust in us, unused." But he cannot understand himself: even if it is "some craven scruple of thinking too precisely on the event," the key point—in some ways, the key point in the whole play—is this:

*I do not know
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,
Sith I have cause, and will, and strength, and means
To do't.*

He goes on: “Examples gross as earth exhort me.” But instead of the Fortinbras “army of such mass and charge” we see Hamlet look at a child seated on a parent’s lap. That reminder—what a child owes a parent—rather than “the imminent death of twenty thousand men” is what motivates his resolve. He goes into a wash room and looks himself right in the mirrored eye as he asks, “How stand I then?” and resolves that his “thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth.” The two deft cuts, together with the mirror on the airplane, make this an extremely powerful reading.

Then follows Ophelia’s mad scene—her madness embarrassing Their Majesties at a formal reception in the curved whiteness of The Guggenheim where she hands out, appropriately for her, *pictures* of herbs and flowers, before her death in the pool at the base of a beautiful outdoor sculpture-waterfall.

The scene between Claudius and Laertes is especially powerful because it reflects so clearly Hamlet’s story in miniature; and Hamlet’s behavior over Ophelia’s grave is much more natural, less wild, than in the text. One modern touch works especially well: Hamlet’s altering of the commission, which has sent Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—and not himself—to death, was surely more easily accomplished on a computer than on the original vellum.

The Ghost begins to pop up occasionally—and always ominously. He makes an appearance, for example, just before Hamlet’s line about there being “a divinity that shapes our ends.” This Divinity is not necessarily a benign one.

The wager Claudius makes on a fencing match between Hamlet and Laertes arrives over a fax machine, and there is another glimpse of the Ghost just before Hamlet’s “Let be.” Presumably, the appearance has a sharp irony: the Ghost wants his son to get on with the business of killing Claudius, not achieve (as we see him do) a hard-won sense of philosophical resignation.

And so, one of the most thrilling finales in dramatic art commences on a rooftop, with real foils and the duelists wired to timing devices. The Queen (intensely and beautifully

played by Diane Venora) has, evidently, been much affected by her last scene with her son and trusts him and not Claudius: she deduces that the wine is poisoned, and she drinks it knowingly—her suicide being an effort at protecting her son and getting herself out of an impossible situation.

There is no scratch with the foil, however: Hamlet asks for “your best violence,” with which request Laertes certainly complies by simply pulling out a gun and shooting Hamlet and then, as they scuffle, himself. The end is quick: Hamlet takes Laertes’ gun and shoots Claudius. It *is* a movie: there is a great deal of blood, and then there are black and white images—his father and mother, Ophelia—as Hamlet dies. The final words, by newscaster Robert McNeil, contain the film’s clear theme (as “the vicious mole in nature,” the famed tragic flaw, was used by Olivier as the organizing principle of his film): the words (taken from the Player King in “The Mouse-trap”) are both uttered, as on a newscast, and then we see them on the teleprompter:

*Our wills and fates do so contrary run
That our devices still are overthrown.
Our thoughts are ours,
Their ends none of our own.*

Like it, or dislike it (or even both): but this is certainly one powerful and highly focused view of *Hamlet*: finally, it doesn’t really matter very much what you do or even what you think about what you do. “Let be.” It will happen. Something. It might well be “dismal,” but it is true that “the readiness is all.”

NOTE: Of considerable interest are two films related to the Hamlet story: *Royal Deceit* (Gabriel Axel, 1994) tells the fascinating Danish source-story found in the Chronicle of Saxo Grammaticus. And *Let the Devil Wear Black* (Stacy Title, 1993) is a modern re-telling of the story. A 1996 *Hamlet*, starring Campbell Scott and set in post-Civil War America, will soon be available on tape and DVD.